

## Gifted Children

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# Book Review: Differentiating for the Young Child: Teaching Strategies across the Content Areas, PreK-3, Second Edition, by Joan Franklin Smutny and S. E. Von Fremd

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*Differentiating for the Young Child: Teaching Strategies across the Content Areas, PreK-3*, second edition, by Joan Franklin Smutny & S. E. Von Fremd.

Reviewed by Pamela L. Shue

For the second edition of *Differentiating for the Young Child*, the authors maintained their focus “to help primary teachers respond to the diverse needs of primary students.” However, they offer additional information to address the concerns of teachers who find differentiating instruction challenging and feel overwhelmed with getting started on such an approach. Although this edition is quite comprehensive, I was disappointed to find a lack of pre-k examples in this book. The title is a bit deceiving when the examples provided are only for kindergarten through 3rd grade. Yes, pre-k teachers can use the ideas in the books for instructing students, but when opening the book I was disappointed to learn that the book uses pre-k in the title but provides little specific content for that population of students.

The book’s chapters are clearly focused and organized and build the readers’ knowledge as they progress from one chapter to another. Each chapter was quite comprehensive and the readers would benefit from a careful exploration of the information in the order in which it is presented. Although not a difficult read, it will most likely be time-consuming and I wonder whether the abundance of information will overwhelm a teacher.

In the first chapter, the authors use the metaphor the ‘journey’ to describe the teaching and learning process. The “learning journey” as they describe it contains five steps, which can be found on page 10. These steps include: (1) Know your traveler (children and teachers), (2) Determine the destination (goals and objectives), (3) Identify proof or evidence that the destination has been reached, (4) Plan the journey, and (5) Reassess and adjust according to new needs and changes. The first chapter provides an explanation of these steps in depth, as well as quality examples of each step in the context of a classroom. Towards the end of the chapter, additional information on the environment, resources, materials, and adaptations are provided for teachers to use to support the diverse needs of their students.

The assessment process for young children is discussed in chapter 2. This component of the book addresses the need for quality assessments that examine the individual child’s abilities. It reminds the reader of the importance of the contribution that quality assessments make to the instructional process. Here again, the authors break down the procedure to assess young students in a differentiated classroom into five manageable sections and explain each in detail. The authors remind us that we need to understand the Why?, What?, Who?, When?, and How? of the assessment process and that each piece is equally informative to support the student and enhance the ‘journey.’ Many examples are

offered throughout the chapter that demonstrate the impact of good assessment measures on learning and teaching.

Often teachers are taught great strategies for learning but classroom management is neglected. Chapter 3 examines these two important components – manageability and strategies – and what these especially mean for differentiation of instruction. The first half of the chapter speaks to classroom management, because without it, “chaos ensues” and differentiated learning does not occur. The second half is dedicated to strategies for individual learning needs of students. The strategies discussed offer teachers an in-depth list of ideas and suggestions for the types of strategies to use, the pace and level of the students, and the groupings that can be created in the classroom. It is important that the reader not overlook the importance of this chapter, since it sets the stage for successful implementation of the various subjects that are individually discussed in chapters 4-8.

The final section of the book addresses the subject areas. A brief chapter 4 discusses the value of the “arts” in the classroom and how art can be infused in all subject areas. Chapters 5-8 look at differentiated instruction as it applies to Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics. Each chapter is structured the same; it begins by looking at what is referred to as “the big picture” which includes the goals of each subject. It then applies the ‘five step plan’ (discussed in chapter 1) and provides examples of each step for the particular subject. This section is full of information and offers many examples from the classroom. After a thorough explanation of the steps, the authors include examples of other teaching and learning activities that have been used in the classroom setting. The end of each chapter provides a list of web sites that can offer ideas, lessons, and other resources to support the teacher in the instructional process.

I found the book to be loaded with well chosen examples and nicely designed strategies and steps for new teachers to begin differentiating instruction or for experienced teachers to refresh their practice. Although individuals new to this process may be overwhelmed by this plethora of information, the author’s organization, step-by-step procedures, and real life classroom examples should be useful for any primary grade teacher. Where the book fell short was its lack of pre-k examples and resources. The book title should say K-3rd grade, and pre-k should be removed. ♦